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Timothy Shaw
St. John Fisher College

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The Child And The Unicorn

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"She is not crazy!"

"She is too!"

"She is not!"

There are few things so boring as an argument between ten-year-olds. Their concept of debate is to shout louder and louder until the opponent gives up. I didn't know how long this had gone on before I showed up, but I decided it had probably been long enough, so I asked what started it."

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The Child and the Unicorn

By Timothy Shaw

The Beginning

"She is not crazy!"

"She is too!"

"She is not!"

There are few things so boring as an argument between ten-year-olds. Their concept of debate is to shout louder and louder until the opponent gives up. I didn't know how long this had gone on before I showed up, but I decided it had probably been long enough, so I asked what started it.

"Jeffrey says Molly is crazy," said Kirstin, nearly in tears. Molly is an old woman who lives somewhere outside of town. No one knows where she came from, or when: she had been there for as long as anyone could remember. The fact that she lived off in the woods added to the town's mistrust of her. The few times she came to town, she spoke to few people; and the kids had taken to calling her "Crazy Molly" (although I'm not so sure that the epithet wasn't coined by one or two of the more puerile parents).

"My father says she's crazy," barked Jeffrey. (I don't doubt it, thought I. Jeffrey is a little brat, mouthy and undisciplined. I had a good idea of where he got his personality.)

"Jeffrey," I said, "your father may be an authority on craziness, but I don't want to hear you talk like that." (I love throwing my weight around with kids half my age.)

I turned back to Kirstin. She's a cute little girl, and usually quieter than the other kids. She had been definitely upset by Jeffrey's attack. Normally, she would have had the sense to ignore him, but something about the subject -- not to mention an audience of a half-dozen of her peers -- made her fight back.

"Don't worry," I reassured her, "Jeffrey doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Yes I do! And she's still crazy!"

I turned on him. "Alright, just how do you know she's crazy?"

"How do you know she isn't?" (The brat was quick.)

"I know because I've talked to her!" said Kirstin.

Whoa! That was a new one on me. I enjoy doing unconventional things. In this town (pop: 2700) anything besides eating and sleeping is unconventional; but not even I had met or talked to Molly. The others were surprised, too.

"Kirstin," I asked, "when did you meet her?"

"Over a year ago. Do you remember when everybody thought I was lost? And I said I was walking in the woods?"

"You had been visiting Molly?"

Her nod made me grin. It was funny: a girl goes off into the woods where no one else goes and talks to a woman whom no one else knows. I turned to the brat.

"Well, there you go. She knows more about Molly than you do, and she says Molly isn't crazy. That's good enough for me."

"I don't believe her. Prove it!"

I don't like to hit little kids -- heck, I don't like to hit anybody -- but Jeffrey was begging for the lesson his parents never gave him. Before the disagreement could escalate into another yelling match, I surprised myself by pulling a card I didn't even know I had.

"Look, why don't we all go and visit Molly ourselves? Tomorrow is Saturday. We could pack a lunch and go hiking in the woods, and then meet Molly. How about it?"

And so it began. They were all excited at the idea of meeting Molly. Besides, it wasn't every day they went hiking in the woods.

That's strange. I think one of the beauties of living in a small town in the country is the nearness of forests. I must have picked up that attitude when I went to college in Rochester. I missed the woods then. City people want to spend their vacations in the country. But country people, although they talk proudly about living in Rural America, see Nature as an obstacle of sorts: the field has to be plowed every year, wildflowers are weeds that interfere with crops, trees take up arable land, and also increase the danger of forest fires. Maybe it's not as bad as all that, but the fact remains: city people want to escape boredom by visiting the country; country people want to escape boredom by visiting the city. If a happy medium exists somewhere, I haven't found it.

The Woman

Later that afternoon, I had an idea: why not ensure the day's success, and warn the woman that she would have company? I thought it would be only fair to let her know. Besides, I wanted to find out more about her, and I thought it best that I meet her before the others did.

So, after dinner, I went walking. I knew vaguely where the cottage was thought to be, and just walked in large circles, looking for signs of habitation. While searching, a sound came to me. First it sounded like someone was knocking two sticks together, over and over. As I got nearer, I heard another sound, keeping rhythm with the first: somebody was singing.

Sure enough, I found the cottage in a small clearing. A quaint little place: log walls, thatched roof, a thin plume of smoke curling from a chimney. A Walt Disney-type house right in the middle of our woods! It was funny.

The sound I had heard was the sound of a loom: I could clearly hear the clack-clack of the shuttle going back and forth; and the voice was singing to keep time with it:

*Secrets high and low
Mysteries as deep as seas
And fates the Fates don't know.*

. . . that was part of it. I noticed a large garden behind the place, and chickens pecking around.

Walking up to the door, I knocked softly. The loom stopped and, after a brief pause, the door opened.

She was not quite my height, and was dressed in a long tunic of dark green. Her hair was pure white, long and straight. Her face, though wrinkled, was rosy-cheeked and pleasant, and lit with a beatific smile and two bright piercing eyes -- she must have been a beauty in her day.

I introduced myself as a friend of Kirstin. That was, apparently, a good start: she beamed at me and asked how "the little dear" was. When I told her that it was partially because of Kirstin that I was visiting her, she stepped out, closing the door behind her and saying she was afraid to invite me in, because "the place is such a mess."

We sat on a bench in front of the house and I related the events of the afternoon. She sat primly, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes on me, as I told her (with a bit of embarrassment) of my suggestion. I spoke hesitantly, unsure of her reaction to a bunch of people dropping in uninvited. She surprised me.

"What a wonderful idea! That's marvelous, simply marvelous! Thank you so much for thinking of it! It's rare that I get company, and I do so love children. That Kirstin is such a dear, so polite and pleasant!"

She was ebullient, but not so much so that I worried about any "craziness" in her. We chatted awhile, and then I said I had to go, and thanked her for being so willing to entertain them. She even suggested a surprise for them, to which I enthusiastically agreed: I went home and called all of their parents, telling them that I was taking their kids on an excursion in the woods, and would they mind if I arranged a meal for the kids, so that they wouldn't be home for dinner? All the parents were agreeable (although Jeffrey's father asked a lot of questions which I bluffed my way around) and everything was set.

Next day, late morning, about 10 kids gathered at my house, and then set out down the road that led out of town, until we reached the creek that ran east under the road. Molly lived somewhere up this creek, everybody knew, but no one had ever ventured up it. Until Kirstin, that is.

Trekking up the creek was uneventful. The kids got wetter than they had to: kids always do. They played in the water, and yelled when they spotted any signs of animals: tracks of raccoons, birds, and a good number of deer.

When I finally led the kids into the woods, it was not quite in the direction of the cottage: I wanted to give Molly time to prepare. Kirstin maintained a discreet silence, having been told to let me do the guiding. Jeffrey threw an occasional barb her way, but I fielded them and shut him up.

When we reached the cottage, Kirstin marched right up to the door and knocked.

There was a silence of no more than 10 or 15 seconds (engineered to let suspense build, I'm sure), and the door opened. Molly wore a long, dark blue tunic. She looked gorgeous, with a twinkle in her eye and a flower in her hair.

"Good afternoon," she said, smiling. "What have we here? Why, it looks like a party! Come in, come in, all of you. How nice of you to come . . ."

She carried on like that, while I herded the group of wide-eyed youngsters through the doorway. I hadn't seen the inside of the house the night before, and I was as anxious as they to see what it was like. It was a rustic little place. One room: a fireplace at one end; a much-mended ladder at the other, leading to a loft where she no doubt slept. Hanging from the rafters were pots and pans and bunches of onions and herbs. In the middle of the room was a long, low table, next to which were long, low benches -- just the right height for short legs. I was surprised that she had just the right furniture for such a party.

It was a perfect place, really. Illumination came from the fire and from lamps hanging from pegs in the walls ("Pig's fat," she explained). I noticed a good-sized cast-iron pot suspended over the fire, sharing space with a spit on which some chickens had been impaled. She was busy showing off her loom, located in a corner of the room, to one side of the ladder. The children weren't interested in weaving so much as they were interested in her: as she demonstrated the movement of the shuttle, they were watching her face, listening intently to her voice. Once she looked over their heads at me and winked. She knew they were a trifle awed, and she was loving every minute of it.

Next, she took them all outside (Kirstin by the hand), showing them the garden and chickens. After they had seen the "estate," they were treated to an invitation to dinner. The children asked (those who remembered) about getting back home. I told them that I had arranged things, and that their parents wouldn't be worried. They all feigned mild anger at my trick, but none really minded, not even Jeffrey: he had become rather quiet (a definite improvement).

She had pulled out all the stops for dinner. There was onion soup, chicken, fresh vegetables, oven-warm bread with fresh butter, goat's milk (for a few brave souls -- I had herb tea), and apple pie for dessert.

After dinner (during which Molly had entertained us with stories about how the chickens must be kept inside in winter, or how the goat once chewed up her favorite stockings), we moved the table aside, and pulled the benches in a semi-circle around the fire. The children were stuffed (so was I), and were filling in the spaces with fresh berries and berry juice. (Molly and I didn't drink fruit juice: "This is for cold nights," she said with a wink.) (Have you ever had dandelion wine?) During dinner, Molly had often prefaced an anecdote by asking Kirstin "Shall I tell them about...?" Kirstin was feeling like Queen of the Day.

"Well," said Molly, when we were settled, "what shall we talk about?"

"I think a nice long story would be good to hear." I was confident that Molly had many entertaining tales in her hoard. Besides, I was feeling like a child again, and I wanted to hear a story.

"Alright then, what shall I tell a story about?"

Everyone offered suggestions, from wild safari hunts in Africa to Martian exploits. Molly just laughed at the children's variety, and tried to quiet them down. When she had succeeded, Kirstin spoke up:

"Could you please tell us about unicorns?" she asked softly.

Molly paused, as if uncertain whether or not she had a story about unicorns. Finally, she nodded.

The Story

Long ago in a castle by the Sea there lived a King. King Haggard (for that was his name) was a tall, gaunt man, with a harsh face and a harsher mind. The country he ruled wasn't very pretty, either, because he didn't want it to be. You see, he had had a wife, a Queen, who was considered the most beautiful woman in the land. Haggard loved her more than anything. Of her name, no one was certain: at the time of this story, she had been dead 20 years. She had died giving birth to a child, King Haggard's daughter. Haggard never quite recovered from the death of his wife, and decreed that the whole land should go into mourning. Everything of beauty was destroyed.

Art was not allowed, colorful clothes were illegal, laughter and singing were treasonous. The King didn't want anything around that was beautiful, else it would remind him of his dead wife.

But his daughter lived, and a good thing, too. She was the only thing of beauty in the kingdom. The Princess Mari skipped up and down the corridors of her home, singing and laughing. Her father, though still torn with grief over the death of his beloved, couldn't impose on his daughter the same restrictions with which he had saddled the country.

You see, she became more and more like her mother every day. Even when she was a few years old, the resemblance brought remarks from everyone who saw her. However, the more beautiful she became, the more grim her father became, being reminded of his loss. How bittersweet were both their lives! For she loved her father, and loved being with him; but she couldn't understand why he took no delight in her company, why he never laughed or sang with her.

(Molly paused, and sighed, and looked at us in silence for a moment. Then she continued:)

One day, in the summer of Mari's 20th year, King Haggard's Royal Councillor came to him with news . . .

'My liege,' he began, 'I bring tidings that may, perchance, be of interest to you.'

'What is it, Vizier?' asked the King. 'What is so important that it must disturb my mourning? Can I not have peace with my sorrow?'

'I beg forgiveness, my liege, but something has happened unrivalled in the history of this kingdom. For a beast has been spotted of late in the country, of which many tales have been told, but which few men have hitherto seen . . . a unicorn.'

'A unicorn?' asked Haggard. 'My Queen, my dear departed Queen, often spoke of unicorns, and of her desire to see one. She longed to gaze on an immortal's beauty. Unicorns were magical, she said, their horns able

to cure anything. Why could there not have been a unicorn present, those many years ago? My love might have been saved. And now! (his voice rose, startling Vizier) And now a unicorn has the audacity to appear in my country? Where I have decreed a state of mourning for the wife whom a unicorn might have saved 20 years ago? It has come to mock me! Well, Haggard is humbled by nothing, mortal or immortal! I'll see that beast's head and horn on my wall ere long! Call my soldiers! Bring weapons! Where was it last seen?'

Yes, I'm afraid he was like that. Twenty years of constant grief can change a man; and Haggard, despite his boasts, was no more invulnerable to stress than the rest of us.

So he called out his soldiery, and they traveled to the forest where the unicorn was reported to have been seen. And there they set their trap.

Vizier had told Haggard that the unicorn could only be lured by a beautiful maiden, pure and chaste. Haggard chose his daughter as his bait, and here he did a worse wrong than any other: for he lied to her, telling her that he wished only to see the unicorn for which her mother longed and waited. Mari was sat on a tapestry laid in a glade in the wood. The King and his men hid in the surrounding trees, their weapons hidden from both the beast and the Princess.

Sitting there, Mari was tense with desire. So great was her delight at possibly seeing a unicorn, she was inspired to song:

*Whither wander Unicorn?
over hill and dale
Hooved flight through darkest night
shining white and pale.*

*What dost see, dear Unicorn?
starry skies abounding
White between the blue and green
and seas beyond men's sounding.*

*What dost know, dear Unicorn?
secrets high and low
Mysteries as deep as seas
and fates the Fates don't know.*

*Take me with you, Unicorn?
that I cannot do
Be content with wonderment
and, of me, just a view.*

By the beauty of the song, or the purity of the singer, the unicorn was attracted. Unicorns love flattery as much as you or I, and this one was no exception. The faintest rustling in the bushes, and the unicorn was there.

Mari was breathless. It was so beautiful. It walked cautiously to where she was sitting, and put its head gently onto her lap. She stroked the beautiful, shining mane; she caressed the milk-white face of the unicorn.

She wanted to sit there forever, alone with the unicorn. But then came another rustling in the bushes, and she saw her father's men approaching with weapons and nets

and rope, and then she saw her father's plan: that he wanted more than just to see the unicorn.

Fearing the harm he might do to the beast, she began to tremble. Should she let her father capture the unicorn, so that she might see it whenever she wished? Or should she shout, make it aware of its danger? The unicorn was resting peacefully, heedless of the approaching men.

Her mind was not long with the decision. She could not let this thing of beauty suffer -- not even for love of her father. She pushed the unicorn's head off her lap, shouting 'Flee!'

The unicorn surged to its feet. The soldiers of the king rushed at it, but it was far too swift for them. It darted and leaped and dashed into the woods, never to be seen again by them.

Haggard was livid. He had wanted the creature dead, his grief-twisted mind blaming it for his wife's death 20 years earlier. He was furious with his daughter. His mind must have snapped completely, for he imprisoned his daughter in her room in the castle. Her meals were brought to her. No one was allowed to speak to her.

She . . . she spent her time gazing out of her window at the bleak, barren landscape that was the product of her father's bereavement, singing the song she had composed. Weeks passed.

One night, when a full moon cast its wan light over the plain, she thought she saw something moving, fast and far off. A pale glow, barely brighter than the moonlight, seemed to be racing across the plain. As it came closer, she realized what it was, and her heart leaped within her. The unicorn! The unicorn was coming toward the castle!

It galloped right up to the castle wall, stopping below her window. Rearing, it whinnied and whickered, then stamped its hooves as if it were impatient and anxious to be gone.

Mari couldn't believe her eyes. It seemed to be waiting for her! She ran to her bed, tearing off the linen and ripp-

ing it into strips with which she could make a rope.

Within minutes she was done, and she climbed out of her window and down her makeshift rope to the waiting unicorn, which bent down so she could climb on its back.

She was never seen again.

Epilogue

"But what happened to them?" someone asked.

"No one is sure," replied Molly, with a sad smile.

"Some people abroad that night might have seen a pale white shape racing across the countryside like the wind. They might have heard a girl's singing in the night, or galloping hooves. I wouldn't know."

It was left to me to break the silence that followed.

"Speaking of night, it's getting late. We'd better go."

It was definitely late, later than I'd planned for us to be gone. There would be little trouble finding our way in the dark -- I had brought two flashlights -- but the parents were certain to be worried: it had been dark for some time. Over the kid's protests, I got them ready for the trip home. They all remembered their manners (even Jeffrey), and thanked Molly, and she invited them all back to visit her whenever they wished. She was so sweet, I couldn't resist the impulse to kiss her on the cheek when I said goodbye.

That return trip was funny. Out of the corner of my eye, I kept seeing patches of pale light, glimpses of something white that stayed just out of sight. Unicorns were on my mind, you see, and I realized that the song, which Mari had sung in the glade and at her window, was the same song which Molly had been singing at her loom the night before. I grinned into the darkness, thinking about the coincidence and the way my imagination ran away from me. To top it all off, I remembered something else:

Molly is the diminutive of Mary.

